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Alienation of Women Characters in the Select Works of Anita Desai

S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Remarkable Literary Output

Anita Desai is a dominant figure in the twentieth century Indo-Anglian fiction. Born to a German mother and an Indian father on June 24, 1937, Anita Desai spent much of her life in New Delhi. Growing up she spoke German at home and Hindi to friends and neighbours. She first learned English when she went to school. It was the language in which she first learned to read and write and so it became her literary language. Her new style of writing is also different from that of many Indian writers, as it is much less conservative than Indian literature has been in the past. For these reasons, she says, “She is not widely read in India, mainly in Indian Universities if it all” (CLS P.29).

Anita Desai deserves appreciation for her remarkable literary output. Persisting in unraveling the mystery of the inner life of her characters, she shows her perpetual interest in their psychic life. Solitude and self-exploration are the recurring themes of her novels. Throughout her novels, children’s books, and short stories, Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of

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contemporary life that her Indian characters must cope with. She maintains that her primary goal is to discover “the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality” (CLS P.50). She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society and the relationships between family members, paying close attention to the trails of women suppressed by Indian society.

Hinges and Women Novelists

Women novelists necessarily have a special way of looking at hinges because they live in severely confined spheres. But that has neither distorted Anita Desai’s vision nor made it inferior. It actually adds some more sharpness to it. In the novels where her protagonist is a woman, this vision focuses on the environment, perhaps shaped by the predominance of patriarchy. It is in the presentation of this confrontation of the female protagonist with the patriarchal oppressive environment that Anita Desai’s feminism surfaces.

Anita Desai is a prolific living writer who has been churning out fiction with consummate skill. The relentless Anita Desai has brought out ten full-length novels of varied length, innumerable short stories and a couple of write-ups. In a short period of time she has aroused a lot of critical attention of late dozens of full-length critical assessments have been flooding the market.

Study of Isolation

The study of isolation experienced by women in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend. In the Indian society women are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making. They are ignored or brushed aside. In such a situation Anita Desai tries to focus on the predicament of women in the society.

Constantly Disturbed Characters

Any attempt to analyse Anita Desai’s feminine consciousness in her fiction should naturally consider her concerns and perspective. Looking at the sensitive portrayal of characters, it can be

concluded that she cares for the individual human beings irrespective of their being male or female. Her characters appear to be exceptionally talented but constantly disturbed by family ties. As a result, they experience discomfort and feel trapped in an oppressive environment. In most cases the hostile environment frustrated the aspirations of the individuals either leading them to their annihilation or a humiliating compromise. The process of her character construction includes a soul-searching self-exploration – may be male or may be female, a struggle for realization and an exposure to agony.

Patriarchal Domination

In novels where Anita Desai delineates a female protagonist, the struggle against the oppressive environment assumes the form of a patriarchal domination in one or the other visage, revealing her feminist predilections. She cares more for the individual, in comparison to the plot as pointed out by many critics, with an amazing insight into her psyche. Not able to amalgamate themselves into the society around, her characters undertake an inner voyage for the purpose of discovering their own selves. She concedes that nobody is an exile from the society and the individuals should strive to integrate themselves and find fulfillment. Anita Desai differs from the other feminists in that she concentrates on the individual's salvation through self-exploration by depicting its motivation. Her novels do not, strangely, deal with the problems of the third world feminism, though the setting is entirely in India.

Institution of Marriage

The most significant social issue that Anita Desai focuses on is the institution of marriage—particularly in the novels where woman is the protagonist. When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has only one way left that is to languish in misery. Somehow she reveals an evident lack of trust in marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt the woman makes to redefines herself inevitably ends up in lack of communication. This leads to them of alienation. Each novel of Anita Desai is progressively a search of the self for a heightened female awareness.

Focus on Flickering Psychological Reasons

Anita Desai, like most women writers, turns her eye inward and writes about the flickering psychological reactions. Emancipation in the texture of her novels is evident for anyone to see. Her themes are original and different from those of other Indo-Anglian writers as she is “engaged in exposing the labyrinths of the human mind and in indicating the ways to psychological fulfillment”(ASC&C P.40). She records the dilemmas faced by the Indian urban individuals. She portrays and analyses human relationships in the context of emotionally related kin which is a fertile area for exploration.

Treatment of the Theme

Anita Desai’s treatment of her theme begins as a simple personal story of an individual woman gradually developing into a wider conflict for her identity and ends up exploring possibilities of transition in the tradition bound Indian society residing in metropolitan surroundings. She brings about a new dimension to the Indian novel by drawing upon the troubled sensibility of a woman in an absurd world. Desai finds the existentialist theories—so fashionable during the sixties—compatible to her themes. Her characters like Maya, Sita and Nanda Kaul are lonely, anxious and estranged and not suffer from a sense of alienation that is not merely physical but psychic. Their estrangement steams from a lack of companionship with which they could feel secure. Desai explores the inner working of her protagonists’ minds unfolding the inner recesses and revealing the fundamental human condition by placing individuals in situations of extreme tension, she thus introduces the psychological vein and a dissociation of sensibility which are not entirely Indo-Anglian.

Most of the women created by Anita Desai have some or the other trait which psychologists would love to analyse. They strikingly appear as individuals and gradually get subsumed as types of women in conflict with their environment. Such types of women are ubiquitous. Anita Desai thus has not simply created situations and characters to populate her pages but is seriously concerned with the predicament of an individual. Woman in each of her novels try to explore their inner self for realization.

Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Where shall we this summer? is a novel which has a female central character, Sita, who suffers from intense delusions of her being separate and different from others while leading an ostensibly normal life—living with her husband and mothering her children. Suddenly she finds reality unpalatable and decides to retire to Manori, an island where once her father lived like the legendary prosper during her childhood. There she intends to freeze her foetus—neither aborting the embryo nor delivering the child. The process of her resolution, experimentation and restoration to the society are discussed in the novel.

Village by the Sea

Village by the Sea is an another novel which deals with a frustrated brother rebels against the family and in consequence, a tender child Zila is forced into accepting the family responsibilities because of her mother's sickness and father's drunkenness.

Fire on the Mountain

Fire on the Mountain is another novel which brings a definite sense of politics to her hitherto essentially family-focused dramas. It is another female-centered narrative that portrays the lives of three women—the elderly Nanda Kaul, her great-grand daughter Raka and Nanda Kaul's lifelong friend Ila Das – who one by one retreat to Carignano, a small village in the Himalayan hill station of Kasauli, to escape the brutal patriarchal worlds in which they have each lived. Criticism of Fire on the Mountain has tended to focus on Desai's detailed study of her three female characters—particularly her presentation of Nanda Kaul – without paying sufficient attention to her attack on patriarchal oppression which, Desai forcefully suggests in this novel, “not only limits the opportunities given to women in India, but mentally and physically damages them” (P.136).

Other Novels

Anita Desai's next novels are Cry, The Peacock, Clear Light of Day, Voices in the City and In Custody. In all these novels the women protagonists are put in urban locations. Maya, the protagonist in Cry, The Peacock, suffers from a type of Oedipus complex, idolizes her father but

becomes miserable as her search for a father substitute in her husband does not measure up to her anticipation. Her barrenness coupled with an albino fortune teller's prediction of impending demise one of the partners after her marriage agitates her mind, occupies her wakeful thoughts and precipitously pushes her towards her insanity.

Bimla in Clear Light of Day exults in a feeling of equality when she wears her brother's clothes and realizes how circumscribed the life of female is. She suffers for her pride of being a woman and ultimately reconciles herself to reality. Monisha in Voices in the City encounters parental discord and suffers later the traumatic experience of barrenness. She feels a sense of liberation when left alone in a jungle where she could be friend the dark corners of the house in solitariness – rather than in Calcutta where the novel is set.

Exploring Indian Sensibility

Anita Desai adds a new dimension to English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of this sensibility a typical modern Indian phenomenon. She thus clearly stands ahead the group in as much as she introduces a shift of ideational focus on the inner climate the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives.

Loneliness

Loneliness is not something unique, but is, in fact, a characteristic society of our time. Today many individuals feel alone, unrelated to others, unable to communicate with those around them, unable to feel at one with them. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone forms the backbone of Desai's themes. The moving description of loneliness leaves a lasting impression on the reader's mind.

Characters like Maya, Nirode, Amla, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Nanda Kaul—in Anita Desai's novels suffer from a sense of isolation that is not merely physical but also psychic. The leading thematic motif of loneliness is brought home to us by a conscious effort on the part of the novelist to describe the contributory factors to its. Mrs. Desai lays much stress on them so much

so that sometimes a certain contributory factor looks like the theme itself. For example, We notice an elaborate description of the break-down of channels of communication between husband and wife. This snapping of communication link is mainly by the incompatibility of temperament between the two. And this phenomenon of dissimilarity in attitudes, resulting in unsatisfactory relationships, runs through all the novels.

Living in a World of Dream and Imagination

Anita Desai's characters are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of dream and imagination and alienated from their surroundings as a consequence of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence. Having wandered for long, they usually arrive at a juncture where either they find that after all their urgency has been in some essential manner.

Anita Desai has an innate ability to peep into the inner recesses of the psyche of her characters rather than the outer spectacle of action. She has enormously contributed to the growth of Indian fiction in English by incorporating psychic aspect of her female characters who have suffered privations and humiliations, neglect and silence, aloofness and alienation.

Alienation as the Organic Connection

Alienation has been the thematic motif that organically connects Anita Desai's fiction. This makes her an exceptionally unique novelist.

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